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**Sino-US relations then and now:  
Discourse, images, policy**



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**Abstract**

Throughout the relevant literatures American imagery of China has been consistently misrepresented and underestimated. Specifically, that imagery has been predominantly conceived in relatively superficial terms, as overtly positive or negative attitudes and opinions vulnerable to shifts at given moments. The significance of that imagery to US China policy has also been largely ignored. The aim of this paper is to re-evaluate American images of China so that they may be acknowledged as inextricable from discourse and identity processes and with the capacity to endure across extended periods of time. Further, it is to demonstrate that those images have always been actively complicit within the enactment and justification of US China policy. To achieve this joint aim three historical moments in Sino-US relations are examined. During each of these moments it is shown that the particular image of 'Uncivilised China' has remained especially prominent within American imaginations, ultimately proving central to policy making decisions in Washington.

**Key Words:** China, United States, imagery, United States, foreign policy

**Introduction**

Populous, wealthy and powerful, the United States and China today represent two of the most influential actors in global affairs. The academic literature on Sino-American relations is enormous and expanding but the focal concern of this article is for the branch of that literature which concerns itself primarily with historical and contemporary American imagery of China and its people. Authors here have been responsible for the most valuable and sophisticated expositions of that imagery across the lifespan of Sino-US relations. However,

images, to varying extents, have been both misrepresented and underestimated in at least two especially pertinent ways.

First, their constitution has regularly been left undetermined, as perhaps best illustrated by the co-editor of one volume who professed the desire not to become distracted by the 'science of imagery' (Conroy, 1991: 13). In the absence of formal explications as to exactly what those images are, they have been conceived primarily, or even solely, as isolated interpretations of actions or behaviour. As a result, analyses have been restricted to assessments of their relative positivity or negativity at given moments. According to Hongshan Li, for example, 'drastic turns in US-China relations have always corresponded with changes of national images and perceptions' (Li, 1998: 2). In the introduction to Akira Iriye's *Across the Pacific*, John King Fairbank observes that the book 'describes the major phases and incidents of American relations with China and Japan...[and] *the successive images that these three people have had of one another*' (Fairbank, 1967: vii, emphasis added). At least three authors have proposed distinct 'periods' or 'eras' of American imagery of China framed around selected events and/or policies (Isaacs, 1972: 71; Cohen, 1973: 55; Mosher, 1990: 21).

Certainly, American images of that country have shifted quickly and dramatically at numerable historical moments but such a restrictive framework of understanding constitutes a flawed ontology. As the historian A.T. Steele explains, 'Americans have tended to react intensely and emotionally to developments in China, with sudden fluctuations of feeling...This highly emotional element complicates the analyst's task'. He concludes: 'The ups and downs of public opinion on China become understandable *only against the historical background and the heritage of assumptions, expectations, emotions, traditions and even illusions and legends which have contributed to our present attitudes*' (Steele, 1966: 1, emphasis added). While American imagery of China, therefore, can represent emotive and comparatively superficial reactions to, or interpretations of, the happenings of particular moments, they are also established assumptions which remain stable and enduring *across* those moments. In short, American imagery of China should be analysed not merely as ideas about *what China and the Chinese do*, but additionally as understandings about *who China and the Chinese are*.

This is a simple but crucial observation, for reasons best described by way of an example. During the Second World War China had been a valuable ally of the United States in its protracted conflict with Japan and popular American attitudes of that country and its people had become ostensibly positive. The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and its entry into the Korean War in 1950 just as Western concerns of a global, 'monolithic' communist threat had begun to pervade American society, however, ensured a rapid and dramatic shift in opinion. Popular American imagery of China became significantly more negative and so, in this sense, what China and the Chinese 'did' is certainly a legitimate

basis for the investigation. However, and as we will see, powerful American images of China and its people both immediately before and after that brief period shared many commonalities with those found in the years, decades and even centuries which preceded it.

Second, contributors to the literature have traditionally concerned themselves little with the significance of American imagery of China to US China policy. Principally, this is because the majority of its authors have not been active within the discipline of International Relations (IR). As such, this may initially appear a misplaced criticism. However, throughout that literature it has been repeatedly stated that those images *are* in fact complicit within the enactment of policy. Li, for example, notes that 'image and perception have always been essential in the making of US-China relations' (Li, 1998: 2). Harold Isaacs similarly suggested that 'images, feelings, prejudices, and personality factors...get somehow cranked into the process of policy making' (Isaacs, 1972: 64). Steele asserted that 'United States policy toward China is a product of the interplay between the administration, the Congress, public opinion and various pressure groups' (Steele, 1967: 205). None, however, provided any meaningful qualification in support of their observations and by failing to elaborate upon the functionality of this 'interplay' each remained apparently insensitive to the nature and structure of the relationship.

These silences of the literature are those to which this paper is designed to speak. It begins with an explication of the constitution of American images of China. It then describes how, as inextricable from the concepts of discourse and identity, those images must be acknowledged not merely as isolated interpretations of actions or behaviour at particular moments but additionally as more stable understandings and assumptions with the potential to endure over time. To more forcefully articulate the broadly unsubstantiated claims of such authors as those noted above, it then describes how that imagery is unavoidably complicit within both the enactment and justification of American foreign policy towards China. The latter half of the paper is devoted to an examination of three pertinent historical moments in Sino-US relations. The intention is firstly to show how particularly powerful American discourse and imagery of what I refer to as 'Uncivilised China' emerged in the early nineteenth century and remained relatively stable for centuries, into the modern period. It is also to demonstrate the ability of that particular discourse and imagery to create the necessary realities within certain courses of American policy towards Uncivilised China could not only be enabled but also legitimised as appropriate and justifiable.

### **Discourse and identity: The constitution of American imagery of China**

Michel Foucault described discourse as 'the general domain of all statements'. Discourse can refer to any statement which entails meaning but equally to a grouping of statements into a recognisable category, such as that of IR (Foucault, 1972: 80). Importantly, discourse

provides subjective interpretations and realities of the world around us, a point reinforced by Howarth and Stavrakakis. They argue that a forest in the path of a proposed new road can represent an inconvenient barrier, a site of scientific interest and/or a symbol of national heritage (Howarth et al, 2000: 3). Imagery, or representation, then, is the discursive construction of reality as the world itself is unintelligible until ascribed meaning through discourse.

While discourse constructs the reality of an otherwise indecipherable world, so too does it work to construct the identities of which that reality is constitutive. As Osborne and Wintle observe, 'identity is always socially mediated and...wholly or partially the precipitate of social discourses...' (Osborne and Wintle, 2006: 16). As discursive constructions of reality, then, images are also the constructions of societal actors. Thus, while the economic and military capabilities of states are undoubtedly critical to the determination of international relations, those states are not given by nature or pre-discursive. Rather, as 'imaginative geographies' states (like forests) are socially constructed with inherently unstable identities (Said, 1995: 49). They exist as ideas as much as territorial physicalities 'out there' in the real world. American discourse of China therefore represents the articulation of ideas about that country in the broadest possible sense. It can be manifest as any number of disparate and single statements where China is the object, but equally to collectives of related statements about it. Further, American images, or representations, of China are discursive constructions of its reality.

The identity of any state, however, cannot be conceived in the absence of understandings about opposing others. This is because meaning itself is created in discourse (Neumann, 1999: 12 and 13). In *Orientalism* Edward Said famously argued that 'the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience'. Importantly, he asserted that the East has been consistently represented as fundamentally inferior in relation to the necessarily superior West (Said, 1995: 1-2). In *Imperial Encounters* Roxanne Lynn Doty similarly investigated the identity processes which have enabled such binary oppositions as "'developed/underdeveloped", "first world/third world", [and] core/periphery"', among others, in which the West has perpetually occupied the former, superior locations (Doty, 1998: 6). As Michael Shapiro argues, the process of making others foreign almost invariably ensures their status as less-than-equal subjects (Shapiro, 1988: 100).

The analyses of Said and Doty, to varying extents, both rely upon the contributions of Foucault. Crucially, Foucault not only argued that discourse is responsible for the construction of our social realities, but that it is neither free nor unrestricted. Discourse, he observed, is tightly contained; 'controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures'. As such, it is more than a simple set of coherent statements (Foucault, 1975: 215). It is the product of rules and regulations which promotes

particular ideas and suppresses others, keeping them from circulation. What emerges are 'regimes of truth' which function within every society. A regime of truth represents a general politics of truth and regulates discourse so that one is able to distinguish between true and false statements (Foucault, 1980: 131). Walter Lippmann put it another way: '[I]n the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture' (Lippman, 1922: 81).

A regime of truth, then, simultaneously endorses certain ideas while rejecting others. The ideas of some people are accepted as true whereas those of others are marginalised, ignored or rejected. This naturalisation of ideas is critical to the formation of common sense assumptions which often go unquestioned because they are believed to represent truth and reality, becoming 'implicit, backgrounded, taken for granted' (Fairclough, 2001: 77). The understanding that social identities are beholden to regimes of truth and processes of naturalisation is advanced by both Said and Doty. Each traces Western historical constructions of non-Western peoples and places and, as already described, the stability of particular binary oppositions through which those constructions have long been articulated.

From these assumptions, it is a fundamental assertion of this paper that American discourse has always been responsible for the construction of images (and hence the reality) of China and the Chinese within American imaginations. Moreover, China's identity has traditionally been constructed as an (often inferior) other in relation to the necessarily superior United States, according to the restrictions imposed by a powerful regime of truth. This regime of truth has ensured that certain representations of China have endured at the expense of others, becoming accepted, common sense understandings which have remained stable over extended periods of time. These understandings, or identity constructions, have also always been inextricable from the enactment of US China policy. It is this understanding to which the paper now turns.

### **Imagery and foreign policy**

As established earlier, authors throughout the imagery literature have previously failed to satisfactorily explicate the salience of American images of China to US China policy, despite emphasising on several occasions a presumed functionality of the former within the latter. In the IR literature too we find a general paucity of analysis as to their relationship. In 1970 Robert Jervis noted that while the military and economic relations of states have been exhaustively studied, images in international affairs have long been neglected (Jervis, 1976: 3-4). Robert Keohane later famously dismissed the utility of 'reflectivist' (in contrast to 'rationalist') approaches to IR because of their rejection of testable theory. He warned that, in consequence, reflectivist literatures would continue to remain on the periphery of the

discipline (Keohane, 1988: 392). 'Issues of war and peace', argues Stephen Walt, 'are too important for the field to be diverted into a prolix and self-indulgent discourse that is divorced from the real world' (Walt, 1991: 223).

Traditionally, foreign policy analysis has reflected the tendency of the dominant realist and liberal schools to ignore the significance of discourse and imagery to the advancement of policy and to focus instead upon material forces. In consequence, the role of ideas within the formation and enactment of policy has been broadly overlooked. Moreover, the foreign policy of states has been understood to constitute the manifestation of those material forces as the objective behaviour of singular, isolated units of analysis. In the particular case of China, for example, Thomas J. Christensen argues that contemporary debates are centred on distributions of material power. 'Power is what matters', he argues, 'and what matters in power is one's relative capabilities compared with those of others, especially other great powers' (Christensen, 2001: 6). In 1989, however, James Rosenau argued that 'the breakdown of the old interstate system is necessitating reformulation of [the ways in which] domestic and international processes sustain each other' (Rosenau, 1989: 5). Peter Gourevitch similarly suggested that the domestic and international realms should be examined holistically, since traditional distinctions between established levels no longer reflect reality (Gourevitch, 1978).

David Campbell provides a useful reorientation of traditional assumptions of foreign policy so that analysis shifts from a concern for the relations *between* states to one for the processes by which states *are made* foreign in relation to one another. Societal representations of foreign lands and people, he argues, are more than descriptions of others 'out there'. They constitute the discursive construction *of* states at all levels of society and the ubiquitous process by which actors are made foreign in relation to the identity of the self. When understood in these terms, processes of representation become a 'specific sort of *boundary producing political performance*' (Ashley, 1987, p.51, emphasis in original). The power inherent to domestic or societal discourse, then, is such that the truths it advances are able to create the necessary reality within which particular policies are not only enabled but justified as logical and proper courses of action. As Foucault explains, power is understood to be inextricable from knowledge so that one cannot be advanced in the absence of the other (Foucault, 1980: 52). The result is a power/knowledge nexus which precludes the advancement of discourse and the establishment of truth as neutral or dispassionate endeavours (Foucault, 1979).

Discursive representation, then, is unavoidably performative in the sense that '*it produces the effects that it names*' (Gregory, 1995: 18). Ellingson agrees, noting that the historical construction of non-Europeans as 'lower' peoples has been at the heart of the establishment of a global European hegemony (Ellingson, 2001: xiii). International relations therefore represent an arena of power that is both political and discursive, wherein discourses create

certain possibilities and preclude others (Apple, 2003, p.6). This means that American discourses and imagery about China have never been produced objectively or in the absence of purpose and intent. Their dissemination must always be acknowledged as a performance of power, however seemingly innocent or benign. They are able to create the imagined conditions within which appropriate, and perhaps even ostensibly unsavoury, action can be enacted while other potential policies are dismissed as inappropriate or impossible. As Doty confirms, 'the naturalization of meaning has had consequences ranging from the appropriation of land, labor and recourses to the subjugation and extermination of entire groups of people' (Doty, 1998: 7).

The intention of this paper is not to dismiss entirely the utility of the 'traditional' approaches to International Relations. Yet, China and the United States share a history of alliance and war, trust and suspicion, sympathy and hatred and their relations should not be conveniently reduced to overtly materialistic analyses of policy, merely *of what happened*. It is necessary to achieve a complementary understanding of *how it was able to happen*. To return to the example provided by Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000: 3), then, the forest could be destroyed, left in tact or even protected but each policy would always be fundamentally reliant upon which of its potential representations is considered true by those responsible for its future. In such a way, American discourse and imagery of China are not merely related to, or somehow affective towards, the enactment of US China policy (as authors within the imagery literature have variously suggested). They are in fact inextricable from, and constitutive of, that policy so that they can never accurately be conceived as separate or distinct. Rather, they must consequently be understood as actively complicit at every stage of its formulation, enactment and justification.

So far this paper has established three important points. First, American images of China have been fundamentally misrepresented throughout the literature. Specifically, they have been conceived primarily, or even solely, as isolated interpretations of actions or behaviour at given moments and not additionally acknowledged as potentially more stable and enduring understandings and assumptions. Second, American discourse has always been responsible for constructing the identities of China in relation to that of the United States. That discourse, moreover, has been beholden to a regime of truth which has ensured that particular images or truths about China have become naturalised and common sense with the capacity to endure across extended periods of time. Third, American discourses and imagery of China are inextricable from US China policy when that policy is acknowledged as the ubiquitous process by which the American self is distinguished from the Chinese other. Accordingly, representational processes have always been actively complicit within both its enactment and justification.

To demonstrate the potential utility of the above retheorisation of American imagery of



China, this paper turns now to examine three particular historical moments of Sino-US relations. The intention is to show that, despite American attitudes and opinion shifting both quickly and significantly at each of these moments, particular images of China exhibited powerful and enduring commonalities and continuities previously neglected throughout the wider literature. China has always existed in numerable and contrasting forms, from a threat to an economic opportunity to a land of mystery and exoticism. Especially powerful and stable images of what I refer to as 'Uncivilised China', however, are isolated for examination here. Further, and in order to confront the argument that imagery is fundamentally 'divorced from the real world', the intention is also to demonstrate how images of Uncivilised China have always been inextricable from US China policy. It is demonstrated that those images have repeatedly created the necessary realities within which actions by Washington could be legitimised as appropriate action and in which alternative policies could be simultaneously disregarded as no alternative at all.

### **Historical and contemporary American images of China**

#### *Early American images: The establishment of Uncivilised China*

In 1784 Americans first established trade relations with China when the ship the *Empress of China* sailed from New York to Canton. Thereafter, popular imagery of China and its people initially constructed them in largely favourable terms, as its ancient and exotic culture was heavily romanticised. Soon, however, they became the objects of overtly derogatory and racist sentiment. For centuries the Chinese had operated a tribute system of commerce which Westerners deemed archaic and corrupt. Foreigners were subject to unfamiliar regulations and restricted to the port city of Canton. Complaints arose quickly among Americans and in 1791 Vice-Consul to Canton Thomas Randall observed that 'the Chinese are considered by most persons who have seen them, as very contemptible, however importantly they think of themselves...' (Syrett and Cooke, 1965: 50). In 1816 one contributor to the *Country Courier* declared the Chinese 'tricksters', 'the most pusillanimous people on Earth' and 'the greatest rogues in nature' (*Country Courier*, 22 August, 1816).

American missionary interest in China similarly emerged early in the nineteenth century. In 1830 American reverends David Abeel and Elijah Bridgeman arrived in Canton with instructions to export Christianity to China. Upon his return, Abeel wrote,

with all her empty boasts of perfection...there is probably no other space on Earth so filled with real wretchedness as China. From the "Dragon Throne", to the lowest menial in authority...her plebian [sic] happiness is the combined result of poverty, virtual slavery and vice (Abeel, 1836: 141).

Even before his arrival in China the *Religious Monitor and Evangelical Repository* had complained that 'there seems to be more obstacles to the introduction of Christianity into China than into any other place. The idolatry and superstition of that country are of the

grossest kind' (Religious Monitor and Evangelical Repository, Sept, 1826). Certainly, such discourses were not those alone which represented China for Americans. China and the Chinese continued to be romanticised and imagined as a potentially lucrative source of income, but American discourse worked to construct the almost antithetical identity of Uncivilised China. Ultimately, this particular construction established a comparatively dominant position within American imaginations for much of the nineteenth century, as it became increasingly naturalised and pervasive common sense.

Uncivilised China was constructed in relation to the Enlightenment ideals of the United States; of John Winthrop's 'city upon a hill' or Thomas Jefferson's 'empire for liberty'. China was understood to be self-evidently removed from the United States. Yet, it was also expected that China should aspire to American standards of civilisation. The United States had been founded in reaction to the nature and practises of the Old World of Europe and so its fabled 'exceptionalism' was grounded upon active progression. In his revolutionary 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*, for example, Thomas Paine had argued that 'the cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind' (Paine, 1995: 5).

Uncivilised China, then, inevitably came to occupy the negative location within a powerful 'civilised/uncivilised' binary. As archaic, despotic and heathen, for some China represented everything against which the United States *was* and its imagined existence says as much about the identity of the United States as it does about China. American discourse of China around this time was not uniformly derogatory and discursive resistance was advanced. However, even when attempts were made to praise the Chinese negative imagery would often inadvertently be reinforced. In 1818, for example, the *Weekly Visitor* sought to challenge prevailing wisdom: 'About three years ago, at a public dinner...the conversation turned on the dishonesty and immorality of the Chinese', the *Visitor* wrote, before describing the story told by a Mr John Locke. A Chinese merchant, Sha-King-Qua, heard of the death of a bankrupt English acquaintance and in sympathy sent money to the man's children. According to the *Visitor* Mr Locke 'was so much affected [by the story], that his eyes filled and his voice thickened' (Weekly Visitor and Ladies Museum, 27 June, 1818). The altruism of Sha-King-Qua is therefore applauded but he is simultaneously confirmed as the exception which proves the rule; as a 'Chinaman' of good character his good deed is worth recalling and the 'dishonesty and immorality' of the Chinese is confirmed.

The frustrations of traders in particular would eventually facilitate military conflict with China. Westerners illegally imported opium into the country and in March 1839 all shipments of the drug in Canton were confiscated. As the first of two so-called opium wars broke out the United States remained officially neutral. However, American merchants supported British efforts to remove the barriers which kept them from China's markets. A petition to Congress in May 1839, for example, noted that if the British decided to blockade China's ports, 'a perseverance in these measures...[would] reduce the Chinese government

to a willingness to listen to all the just and reasonable demands of the foreign power'. The United States should, it concluded, 'act in concert...to establish commercial relations with this empire upon a safe and honourable footing, such as exists between all friendly powers' (US House of Representatives, 1839: 207).

'Just and reasonable demands' are those made by law-abiding, civilised nations which sought commercial relations based upon 'a safe and honourable footing'. Americans could therefore *legitimately* side with their Enlightened European cousins against necessarily inferior Uncivilised China. The war ended in 1842 with total defeat for the Chinese, an outcome which only confirmed their uncivilised, inferior status (Miller, 1969: 112). In 1856 the second opium war broke out. The bombardment of Canton began in October and the American press were either supportive or least sanguine about the action taken, which also involved American troops. 'We are in for the war', the *New York Herald* proclaimed, 'and God be thankful for it!' (New York Herald, 21 January, 1857). Once more, China lacked the standards of modernity boasted by the West and images of that country and its people provided discursive constructions of a reality within which the identity of Uncivilised China had become a naturalised truth. In such a way, military action for the purpose of civilising China could be deemed unproblematic.

#### *Early twentieth century images: China's revolutionary era*

Between 1898 and 1901 the so-called Boxer Rebellion erupted in China. The Boxers believed that foreigners enjoyed a privileged position within their territory but the resulting unrest was quashed by Western troops. According to Rey Chow, a 'King Kong syndrome' emerges whenever Westerners, gripped by a foreign ('Third World') spectacle, 'become repelled by what is happening "over there"' (Chow, 1991: 84). Such a response was exhibited by the American press throughout the Boxer Rebellion. The *New York Times*, for example, reported that 'an army of civilization' had arrived in China to pacify the unrest (New York Times, 20 June, 1900). The *Chicago Daily Tribune* argued that China had to be 'rescued from herself by the powers' (Chicago Daily Tribune, 23 July, 1900). Ultimately, the United States committed 2,500 troops to aid those 'civilised' nations with which it shared a Western bond, a communion which accentuated the differences between the West and non-West (Doty, 1998: 33-36).

The rebellion left little hope for the ruling Qing dynasty and from October 1911 revolutionary fervour gripped China. Numerable provincial assemblies quickly declared their independence and in February the following year Emperor Puyi abdicated. The Republic of China had already been established with Sun Yat-sen its provisional president but the American press were initially dubious as to the ability of the Chinese to establish a Western-style polity. 'The Chinese are industrious, apt, dextrous, and accustomed to frugal life', the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed, 'but they do not possess a single element of character out of

which republican citizenship can be manufactured' (Los Angeles Times, 27 April, 1912). The *Chicago Daily Tribune* informed its readers that the Chinese were 'dumb to progress' (Chicago Daily Tribune, 14 February, 1912).

Some applauded the 'reformers': 'The sympathies of Americans are naturally with the movement toward a republican form of government', noted the *Washington Post* (Washington Post, 8 November, 1911). Indeed, Sun's aspirations attracted renewed American hope for China and in some respects were suggestive of an emerging 'age of admiration' (Isaacs, 1972: 71). The *New York Times* asserted that, 'for the past decade there have been many capable and high-minded men among the reformers...there is good to reason to think that they will be able to guide the nation with a fair degree of safety' (New York Times, 31 October, 1911). Disparities in opinion are unremarkable, even predictable, but what underpinned the arguments of both sides were naturalised understandings that inferior, Uncivilised China had to change; there was no acceptable alternative. 'Whatever injustices may be committed in the course of the modernization of China', the *Times* has earlier asserted, 'will evidently be lesser evils than the continuance of unmodernized China' (New York Times, 20 June, 1900).

The United States had been born from revolution, the rhetoric of which, as we have seen, supported freedom for all people, even those beyond American shores. Sun, 'China's George Washington', appeared intent on building a modern republic (Sharman, 1934: vi). Yet, Americans judged consequent revolutions by the 'exemplary' model of their own; John Adams declared theirs 'the grandest revolution that has ever taken place in the world' (Adams, 1852: 470). Thus, while enthusiasm for helping the Chinese had certainly increased it was a response grounded primarily upon enduring assumptions about China's identity. In other words, this new 'era of paternalism' saw a lessening of hostility towards the Chinese but American expectations were still that Uncivilised China had to conform to superior Western ideals; there was no acceptable or conceivable alternative (Cohen, 1978: 55).

That China's revolution would be assessed against the paragon of US republicanism was illustrated perfectly by the *Washington Post*:

To say their government is a republic does not prove it to be so. The way to prove it is for all the women to wear high-heeled boots, girdle corsets, hobble skirts, and basket hats and for the male sex to come over to this country and patronize American tailors. Then, and only then, will we be convinced that China really has a republican form of government (Washington Post, 17 March, 1912).

It was understood that China had yet to attain the civilised standards of Western nation-states and so while imagery briefly became ostensibly more positive the Chinese were still classified as a fundamentally inferior, uncivilised nation and people. The limitations of conceiving of imagery as primarily beholden to events and actions are hence reaffirmed by

the fact that, despite the advancement of overtly positive responses to this temporarily specific moment, powerful underlying assumptions of identity informed Americans that in 1912, as throughout much of the nineteenth century, China remained a lesser and unequal partner. To a significant extent, American imagery of the Chinese remained largely consistent durable and Washington's hesitancy in awarding diplomatic recognition was justified accordingly.

On 20 July a memorandum from the Division of Far Eastern Affairs enquired as to 'whether the present Chinese Government may not be regarded as so far substantially conforming to the accepted standards of international law as to merit formal recognition?' Two months later, Assistant Secretary of State Huntington Wilson declared:

...it would be more in accordance with established precedents to defer recognition of the Chinese Republic until a permanent constitution shall have been definitely adopted by a representative national assembly, a president duly elected in accordance with the provisions of such constitution, and the present Provisional Government replaced by a permanent one with constitutional authority (Department of State, n.d.: 81 and p.86).

China, then, remained an uncivilised outsider, devoid of such hallmarks of civilisation as a 'president', a 'permanent constitution' and a 'representative national assembly'. The prerequisites for acknowledgement were of Western design as its own standard of government had first to be in place. The Chinese recognised this and on the day of his nation's formal inauguration Sun Yat-sen said: 'with the establishment of the provisional government we will try our best to carry out the duties of a civilised nation so as to obtain the rights of a civilised state' (Cohen, 1972: 244).

Recognition was formally awarded in May 1913 by the new American president Woodrow Wilson. However, to many Americans 'the China mess was incomprehensible and hopeless' (Thomson, Stanley and Perry, 1981: 162). In 1923 Secretary of State Charles Hughes argued that China had 'failed to provide a government which could...discharge her international obligations' (cited in Hibbert, 1964: 284). As late as 1928 his successor Frank Kellogg declared:

The United States is not concerned with the type of government set up in China. It cares only that conditions shall be created permitting the citizens of China to achieve their own highest welfare and engage freely with citizens of the United States in such relations as shall be mutually desired and profitable...(Quoted in Quigley, 1929: 473).

Thus, the United States, in fact, was very concerned with the type of government which might be established in China. As ever, it was one which had to conform to American standards of civilisation.

### *Late twentieth century images of China: The 1989 Chinese protest movement*

The 1980s represented 'golden years' in Sino-US relations as prevailing American imagery of China became increasingly complimentary (Kennedy, 2003: 51). On 1 January 1979 the Carter administration had established full diplomatic ties with Beijing for the first time in three decades. The new leader of the PRC, Deng Xiaoping, became the latest Chinese moderniser to be lauded throughout the United States. In the same year he toured the country, a trip which served only to increase his popularity among Americans. Even previously divisive issues like human rights were overlooked as damning reports 'fell dead off the presses'. The societal regulation of discourse was such that publications critical of China's human rights record had little impact on an American public disinclined to afford them attention (Mosher, 1990: 195). American imagery had entered another period of renewed positivity. As it had during China's revolutionary period of the early twentieth century the country had a leader Americans admired and a plan for reform which seemed to have been inspired by the superior American model. Yet, this positivity had once more emerged as a result of identity construction processes as expectations for China remained wedded to the values of the United States itself.

After the death of the popular statesman Hu Yaobang in April 1989 widespread protests erupted across China which lasted for several weeks. Their participants were socially heterogeneous and the movement was nationwide but the attention of the Western media inevitably fell upon Beijing. The Tiananmen Square protests were relatively peaceful until government troops were ordered to restore control and in the early hours of 4 June the movement was broken up by force. The Chinese government claimed that three hundred people were killed, with another seven thousand injured. These figures, however, are heavily disputed and may have been much higher. An Amnesty International Report, for example, suggests that at least 1,000 people had been killed. The cover of *Time* magazine declared simply 'massacre in Beijing' (Time, 12 June, 1989). The *New York Times* reported, 'Crackdown in Beijing; Troops attack and crush Beijing Protest; Thousands fight back, scores are killed' (New York Times, 4 June, 1989). Unlike in the past, the Chinese were no longer so brazenly identified as uncivilised or inferior but that imagery can prove both stable and enduring and that Uncivilised China remained a powerful, naturalised construction was firmly evidenced by the events of 1989 and American reactions towards it.

The events in Tiananmen, observes Richard Madsen, caused revulsion for Americans not only because of the deaths that occurred, but because the episode did not end as they had hoped (Madsen, 1998: ch.1). Illusions of an impending 'free China' had appeared but the American understanding of freedom, of the mutually-reinforcing liberalisation of the economic and political, was not shared by the Chinese protesters (Madsen, 1998: ch.5). Indeed, some confessed not to even know exactly what they wanted (Madsen, 1998: 17). The demands for political reform were particularly misrepresented since the protesters'

understanding of democracy diverged significantly from those of Americans. The majority of student participants were demanding an end to corruption and economic inequality rather than the establishment of Western-style democratic elections.

The movement, then, was interpreted through the values of American identity so that discourse remained tightly controlled and regulated. Confirmation of China as an uncivilised other in relation to the superior and law-abiding West soon followed as Washington lobbied the world's leading multilateral economic organisations for a withdrawal of support. Weapons sales to the PRC were banned and high level military exchanges were postponed. Another round of sanctions later followed in which lending to China by international financial institutions and official diplomatic exchanges both ceased. Sanctions against Beijing were legitimised on the basis that China had once again failed to conform to the superior standards of Western civilisation. As Suettinger puts it, the West 'recoiled in horror and disgust, expelling it from the company of modern civilized nations' (Suettinger, 2003: 1).

In 1992 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell argued that America remained 'a remarkable nation. We are, as Abraham Lincoln told Congress in December 1862, a nation that "cannot escape history" because we are "the last best hope of earth"' (Powell, 1992: 32). As the 'last best hope' the United States could still unproblematically occupy a location from which it claimed exceptionalism, through an identity based upon the values of democracy and liberty for all. The events in and around Tiananmen Square were framed accordingly and on 6 June 1989 President George Bush argued that

the momentous, tragic events in China give us reason to redouble our efforts to continue the spread of freedom and democracy around the globe...to broaden the community of free nations, and to reaffirm the rights of man (Woolley and Peters, *American Presidency Project* [online]).

*Time* informed its readers that by the morning of 4 June 'the great, peaceful dream for democracy had become a horrible nightmare' (Time, 12 June, 1989). However, that dream was American, not Chinese. Despite apparent signals from China that it was now following in the footsteps of the West yet another Chinese 'revolution' had failed to conform to American expectations. The imagined geography of Uncivilised China existed to Americans as starkly now as it had done a century earlier as it remained a nation and a people which lacked the imagined standards of the civilised Western world. It had taken just a few weeks for prevailing imagery of China to shift dramatically from overtly positive to negative but beneath that shift lay enduring and powerful continuities and commonalities. Harry Thayer, former director of the American Institute in Taiwan, articulated the situation perfectly: 'China was oversold in 1978-79, just as we had oversold Chiang Kai-shek in World War II...the Chinese turned out not to be saints and perfect partners after all. This is a long standing problem in the relationship' (Tucker, 2001: 327-328).

## Conclusion

Warren Cohen is representative of much of the relevant literature when he describes the United States' historical relations with China as 'schizophrenic', with 'a pattern of alternating highs and lows' (Cohen, 2010: 278 and 280). Indeed, throughout the body of comparable literature American images of China and the Chinese have been variously misrepresented and underestimated. Certainly, American images of China have shifted quickly and dramatically in terms of their relative positivity and negativity at given moments. However, this analysis shows that they have also endured as more powerful underlying assumptions about China's identity *across* extended temporal periods. Specifically, it has argued that imagery should be acknowledged not only as representations of *what the Chinese do*, but additionally constitutive of enduring assumptions about *who the Chinese are*.

To achieve this, a reinterpretation of imagery emphasised its inextricability from discourse and identity processes. American discourse is that which has always constructed images of China in particular ways, providing selected realities of that country and its people. Moreover, because the identities of others are always produced from understandings about the identity of the self, China has always been historically represented in relation to the United States. The paper has argued that the idea of Uncivilised China has remained an especially durable construction, produced in relation to the necessarily more civilised United States. It has also shown that foreign policy must be understood not as the actions of pre-discursive states but the continual process by which states *are made* foreign in relation to one another. In such a way, it has argued that American imagery of China represents an inextricable component of US China policy. That imagery, in fact, has always been actively complicit at every stage of its formulation, enactment and justification.

During the earliest period of Sino-US relations American discourse worked to construct the identity of Uncivilised China as backward, heathen and anachronistic and as failing to adhere to Western standards of civilisation. Imagery of Uncivilised China became accepted and naturalised and endured for generations, throughout the Chinese revolutionary period in the early years of the twentieth century and during the 1989 protest movement and the events in Tiananmen Square (among innumerable others). Imagery at each of these particular moments can be logically analysed in isolation as dramatic shifts of attitude and opinion were undoubtedly in evidence. However, beneath these shifts lay more enduring assumptions of identity which remained highly durable and largely unchanged. Expectations of Uncivilised China have always been that it civilise to Western standards. As such, whether American imagery of that country has appeared more overtly positive or negative at any given moment is, to a certain extent, irrelevant. Further, at each of these moments comparatively stable understandings about Uncivilised China worked to legitimise actions in Washington. They created realities within which Uncivilised China had to change, and in



which certain political possibilities could be introduced at the expense of others. They allowed Americans to support the British-led opium wars of the mid-nineteenth century, delay recognition of the new Chinese government in 1912 and implement sanctions upon Beijing after the Tiananmen Square 'massacre' of 1989.

China's increasing involvement in contemporary global affairs means that Washington's desire for Beijing to participate peacefully and cooperatively within the US-dominated system of global political and economic governance is more palpable today than ever. Powerful American images of China and the Chinese and the policies they will serve to enable and justify must accordingly become a focus of more concerted scholarly attention. It is imperative, in other words, that these 'schizophrenic' relations be acknowledged as at least partly contingent upon pervasive and durable imagistic foundations. Only in this way can the contours of the relationship between the United States and China be more satisfactorily understood so that historical episodes we wish not to be repeated might somehow be avoided in the future.

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